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FOOD CONTROL AND PRICE-FIXING IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE. II

The situation in France in the summer of 1793 called for a venture in price regulation and control of resources as the only feasible solution of the problem of tumultuous markets, uncertain supply, and soaring prices. Since spring the war had been going badly. The Austrian invader was in the northern departments. The royalist standard was flying in the Vendean West. Lyons, Bordeaux, and Marseilles, angry at the proscription of the Girondins, had risen against the Convention, the frightened accomplice of Jacobin Paris. Toulon, the naval arsenal of the South, had admitted the British fleet. It would be hard to imagine an outlook more comprehensively dark. Under such circumstances economic salvation did not appear to lie in the orderly adjustment of supply and demand.

A force which worked with almost equally fatal effect in disorganizing trade was the inflation of the paper money.¹ By the summer of 1793 over four billions of livres had been issued. In six months the value of an assignat in coin had sunk one-half. The effect of such rapid fluctuations in prices was to introduce a speculative element into business and to turn the French into a nation of gamblers. An English lady wrote from Péronne, August 1, that the "whole country are become monopolizers, the desire of realizing has so possessed all degrees of people, that there is scarcely an article which is not bought up and secreted."² The assignats, like bad coins, were not good to keep, but should be handed on quickly. This accounts for the fact that the current slang of political speech for an opponent was "egoist" or "speculator." So many were apparently making fortunes out of the public miseries that the rich were treated to more than their customary portion of verbal obloquy and were the chosen victims of ingenious financial

¹ See especially E. Levasseur, *Histoire des classes ouvrières en France depuis 1789*, deuxième édition, I, bk. 1, chap. 6. See also article by Levasseur in *Journal of Political Economy*, II, 179-202.

² *Residence in France*. By an English lady. Edited by John Gifford, I, 317.

strokes. The Convention was aware of the peril that lurked in piles of printed money, and announced tremendous withdrawals from the plethoric circulation. One method was drafting the wealth of the unpopular rich by means of an extraordinary income tax, which should return to the treasury a billion in assignats. When it came to arranging the terms of the levy all except the poor received the compliment of inclusion among the rich, and none were permitted to retain incomes above 4,500 livres; the remainder was commandeered. But the rich had been hounded so much that they had become very shrewd in taking cover, and the Convention never dared to confess how little it succeeded in collecting. The plan of reducing the amount of the assignats by withdrawing all issued before the overthrow of the monarchy was more successful. Nevertheless, as new issues were made, the excess grew rather than decreased. By September the discount was 72 per cent.

At the time when the markets were ruined by this combination of circumstance and blunder, the supply of food was seriously endangered by the call of young men to the imperiled frontier. France, first of modern peoples, became a nation in arms. In August the Convention voted the *levée en masse*, what we call the "selective draft." Men from eighteen to twenty-five formed the first "requisition," and were to be enrolled immediately. Later calls might be made upon older men, including those of forty. By the spring of 1794, 850,000 men had been assembled in fourteen armies, covering all the frontiers. As the bulk of the French population was rural and engaged in farming, conscription was a serious blow to agriculture. From a single department 5,000 were taken, chiefly farmers' sons or farm laborers. The farmers complained that unless these young men were exempted there would be none to thresh the grain of 1793 or to prepare the ground for the crops of 1794. The loss of horses, taken for transport, was almost equally serious.

The impulse to regulate the price of the necessities of life did not come from any clear perception of the influence of the war upon the operation of the laws of supply and demand. The people had a fixed idea that dearness and scarcity were the result of speculation. The tradesman was evidently at the bottom of the trouble,

and the batteries of denunciation were turned upon him as upon the farmer before. In the Convention only a few speakers pointed out the real causes, and one whose proofs were disagreeably explicit was howled down. The politicians instinctively chose the easier path of dealing with abstractions like the "avaricious," the "egoist," the "conspirator," and they readily supported the popular tradition that the merchant was a speculator, a forestaller, and a monopolist.

New maximum laws were inevitable, but the political chaos in which the nation was struggling offered little hope that these laws would be drafted by competent men. It is significant that in July, when the Convention desired a project to check hoarding and appointed a commission to work out a plan, the chairmanship was given to Collot d'Herbois, a third-rate literary man who had forced his way to the front in Paris by the use of an ample vocabulary, flavored with the sentimentalisms Rousseau had popularized. Moreover, legislation was often hurried through to satisfy the clamor of the Paris populace.¹ The faction in control at the Hotel-de-Ville was led by Chaumette and other men whose mouths were filled with humanitarian phrases, but whose minds carried no ballast. The process of law-making at this period often degenerated into an ignoble political auction, with one set of agitators striving to outbid the other. It is not surprising that blunders were made which compromised the success of the maximum legislation.

The Convention in its war upon high prices first attacked the problem of hoarding. Its evident expectation was that if enough goods were thrown upon the market prices would fall. The spirit of its decree, adopted late in July, is sufficiently indicated by the terms of the first article, which read, "The penalty of hoarding is

¹ The state of the popular mind becomes very clear if one reads the reports of the secret agents of the Ministry of the Interior. The two best collections of these are Pierre Caron's *Paris pendant la Terreur, Rapports des agents secrets du Ministre de l'Intérieur*, 2 vols., and his "Rapports de Grivel et Siret, commissaires observateurs parisiens du Conseil Executif Provisoire" (Septembre 1793—Mars 1794) in *Bulletin* (1907) de la Commission de l'histoire économique de la Révolution française. Several reports also appear in Dauban's *La Demagogie en 1793 à Paris*, and in Schmidt's *Tableaux de la Révolution française*.

death.” The crime is defined as purchasing or holding merchandise or supplies of primary necessity without putting them on sale daily. This hit not only the merchant but the thrifty provider who should attempt to stock his pantry against a day of want. But it was the merchant against whom popular suspicion was chiefly directed. No difference was made between wholesalers and retailers. Both were to make an inventory of their goods and keep it posted on the outside of their stores. The local authorities were to see that the lists were exact.¹ To us such a law seems like the establishment of a “Reign of Terror” over tradesmen. By the consumer of 1793, however, witness of selfish hoarding by householders and merchants alike, which an English lady resident in France called “an illiberal and pernicious commerce,” such measures were frantically applauded.²

The trouble with this legislation was not so much its terrible threat as its failure to make definite the line at which the customary operations of trade pass into schemes to corner the market and take toll of the public misfortunes. Their consequence was to destroy trade rather than control it. As a prominent member of the Committee of Public Safety said later, “The merchants were thrown into prison upon the accusation of the first intriguer who shouted out his suspicions at a popular society. The local revolutionary committees acted as judges without appeal. To escape a similar fate the other merchants hastened to dispose of their merchandise and did not restock. Even individual citizens did not dare to buy in quantity, fearing to be condemned for hoarding.”³ They were forced to live from hand to mouth, and to join the daily throngs about the baker’s, the butcher’s, and the grocer’s shops.

All through the summer, while the Convention was disturbed by constant reports of the failure of the first venture at price-fixing, occasional demands were made for a broader scheme which should

¹ For text see Duvergier, *Collection des lois*, etc., VI, 58–59.

² *Residence in France*, I, 317.

³ Robert Lindet, in *Procès-verbaux des comités d’agriculture*, etc., IV, 610–11. In December, 1793, the Convention, learning that a wholesale wine merchant had been condemned as a monopolizer because in his absence his son committed a technical violation of the law, suspended the action of the law until its terms could be redrafted. *Arch. parl.*, LXXXII, 155, 419. This was not done until April 1, 1794.

include all necessities of life. Twice the Paris Deputy Raffron had spoken in the Convention on the subject. Late in August the Jacobin Club had presented a petition for bread at three sous a pound and such prices for other indispensable products as should bring them within reach of the sans-culottes. To reinforce the argument came the appeal of the farmers that if the principle of a maximum for grain was retained, they should have the benefit of lower prices for the things they were compelled to buy.¹ The government already had warning enough that the call was to be for more rather than less price-fixing. In June Garat, Minister of the Interior, had sent a questionnaire to the department authorities, asking for the current prices and the prices for the same products for 1790. Many of the departments replied, so that the government was well informed upon the local situation in the departments as well as in Paris.²

The adoption of a new plan to regulate the price of grain came first. The Paris deputies charged that the failure of the May law was the consequence of the ill-will of local administrators and the greed of farmers. Danton, still an influential leader, reinforced the argument by joining appeal and menace, as was his custom. "The Convention," he shouted, "must pronounce today between the interests of forestallers and those of the people. . . . Nature has not abandoned us, let us not abandon the people. They will take justice into their own hands, they will fall upon the aristocrats, they will tear from them by main force what the law should grant. Pronounce today, tomorrow we will execute." That such rude eloquence missed the point, which was to determine how the popular stomach—not the popular passion—was to be fed, did not lessen its compelling power. The Convention accepted the principle of the proposal that the prices of grains should be fixed by the Convention itself, and should be the same everywhere with allowances

¹ A. Tuetey, *Répertoire général des sources manuscrites de l'histoire de Paris pendant la Révolution française*, IX, Nos. 1092, 1160; Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, V, 360-63; *Arch. parl.*, LXXII, 474-75; LXXIII, 258; A. Mazaud, *Révendications économiques des assemblées primaires en Juillet, 1793*, pp. 91-92.

² Biollay, *Les prix en 1790*. Biollay reports that forty-eight local reports, made from June to August, exist in the archives. The inquiry, he says, was conducted in a hasty fashion.

for transportation. At the same time, in order that the farmer should buy, as he must sell, at fixed prices, the Convention agreed to a general maximum law covering all necessities of life.¹

The principle was established, but the details were not yet worked out. The debate was likely to run on for days. The restlessness of Paris increased. Workmen began to congregate, demanding higher wages and threatening to strike. Crowds filled the square in front of the Hotel-de-Ville. Adopting with unhappy literalness the language of Danton, the Commune voted to proceed in a body to the Convention and demand the "creation of a revolutionary army, which should at once put itself in motion, to thwart the manoeuvres of egoists and forestallers, and deliver them to justice."² When, on September 3, Chaumette appeared in the Convention at the head of the deputation, he became very specific in his explanation of the way justice should be meted out. The army, said he, should be accompanied "by an incorruptible and fearful tribunal, and by the fatal instrument that severs at a single blow the plots and the lives of the plotters." By this method, he was sure, "avarice and greed would be forced to disgorge the riches of the earth, the inexhaustible mother of all her children." There immediately followed a struggle between the partisans of the Commune and the majority of the Convention, at the close of which the Convention voted to create a "Revolutionary Army" for the work of terrorizing the reluctant farmers. The only thing it did not concede was a peripatetic guillotine. The laws fixing the price of grain and of the necessities of life were hurried to completion, the first on September 11, and the second on September 29.

The law of September 11³ was simply a revision of the law of May 4, to correct defects which experience had made clear or to satisfy the suspicions of a new group of revolutionaries. The most important change was in the method of determining the price. The first maximum had been based upon the average prices for a period of three months in the market of each department. This gave as many prices for grain as there were departments.⁴ Some

¹ *Arch. parl.*, LXXIII, 357-59. ² *Moniteur* (Réimpression), XVII, 517-18.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 521 f.; Caron, *Commerce des céréales* (Recueil de Textes), pp. 60-71.

⁴ For further details see *Journal of Political Economy*, XXVII, 87 ff.

departments had prepared rates as the law directed; others had established arbitrary rates or no rates at all. The new law attempted to make a uniform price voted by the Convention, with allowances for a part at least of the cost of carriage.

The success of this law would depend upon the mechanism which the government was able to substitute for the old and highly complex machinery of trade. The method of commandeering supplies for markets, indicated in the May law, and already employed by many local authorities, was now the sole reliance. If it was to be applied efficiently, the government must know the stocks of grain possessed by the farmers, in order that from the abundance of some localities the lack in others might be supplied. The September law, accordingly, opened with strict rules for obtaining an inventory of all stocks, and reports of the amounts, from one grade in the hierarchy of officials to another, until the Ministry of the Interior could see at a glance upon what armies, cities, and needy departments had to depend for food. Previous laws had opened with similar articles, and in order that the new effort should succeed where others had failed, each grade in officialdom was threatened with punishment if the grade below should not fulfil its task, or if, in turn, it should not report to the grade above. The unfortunate officials, who had troubles enough already, were to get their punishments "going and coming," as the slang phrase has it. Unaccustomed as they were during the Revolution to exact obedience to higher authority, their failure was not the real obstacle that had to be overcome. Had they been models of submission, the farmer still had to be reckoned with, and his invincible repugnance to be inquired into after the manner of the Old Régime; a repugnance strengthened now by his fear of losing his little stock of grain, most of it required for family needs or for seed, or as a safeguard against a short crop the next year. The government sought to reassure him in circulars, telling him that all Frenchmen were brothers and that they should help one another, and promising that if he was asked to surrender his supply in a crisis it should be promptly restored to him by drawing upon stocks held somewhere else.¹ This was very pretty as sentiment, but he knew that under

¹ Caron, *Recueil de textes*, pp. 76-77, 79-81.

such a government the chances were that he would go hungry if he parted with the grain he had. The safest way was to hide it, if the local officers were too thorough in their method of controlling his statements. This inventory, like all its predecessors, was to be a farce, and the luxury of penalty provided to stimulate all these brethren only made the failure more grimly ludicrous.

The second condition of success in substituting the method of requisition for the ordinary operation of trade was a wise organization of this formidable function. To furnish the local markets the machinery created by the law of May 4 was preserved; that is to say, each administrative body had the right within its jurisdiction to commandeer all stocks, whether owned by farmer or trader, and the Minister of the Interior was to draw upon the surplus of the grain-producing departments to cover the needs of the departments which could not provide for themselves. If a farmer had no grain threshed, he might be required to thresh what he had in sheaf, and if he excused himself on the ground that he could not find laborers, the authorities should draft men to do the work.¹

As the people could not eat grain, it was necessary to make sure that millers and bakers, as well as farmers, should remain at their tasks. The law, therefore, drafted all millers. If anyone should abandon his work without giving three months' notice, he was liable to a fine of three thousand livres. The bakers of Paris were subject to the same rule. In this way the scheme of force was completely substituted for the ways of freedom in providing for supplies.

One of the abuses which had helped to ruin the grain trade had been the practice of sending out buyers to obtain supplies for the armies, for the navy, and for large towns, especially Paris. These men had competed with one another and had forced up the price of grain. They had even been accused of speculating on their own account. When the first maximum law nominally put a stop to this by fixing prices, the abuse persisted in another form. Agents vied with each other in seizing stocks. An administrator of the Department of the Nord wrote in September that the military agents were rushing about the countryside like wild beasts seizing

¹ Section 2, art. 19.

grain in the sheaf, straw, and hay, and leaving as the sole pay certificates which the farmers could find no one to honor. His colleagues declared that although they were filling all the requisitions made upon them, regimental colonels, commanders of posts, sergeants, corporals, and even surgeons, were commandeering without any authority whatever except the authority which a detachment of soldiers conferred.¹ The new law attempted to correct the evil by annulling all commissions and reserving the right of requisition to the deputies of the Convention, who were now regularly present with the armies. Paris was to be provisioned in the same way, and to deprive the agitators of a potent weapon, a year's supply was to be on hand each March 1 as long as the war should last.

To avoid another source of confusion only the markets which existed before 1789 were recognized, and the communes which had been tributary to them were still to supply them, if not voluntarily, certainly after summons by the district magistrates. After the same manner departments were assigned to each army.²

The work thrown on the Ministry of the Interior was enormous, and the Committee of Public Safety, late in October, went to the Convention with the recommendation that a new administration be created, a board of three, called a Commission of Subsistence and Provisioning. This Commission was to be the "Food Dictator" of France. In the words of the committee it was to draft supplies as the republic was drafting men. The Convention accepted the proposals of the Committee of Public Safety and the services hitherto installed at the Ministry of the Interior were put under the charge of the new commission. Its powers were not limited to food; it could commandeer other necessities for the use of the army and navy, and it was to see that merchandise was equitably distributed in different parts of the country. The enforcement of the laws of September 11, on the grain supply, and of September 29, on maximum prices for all necessities, was its special duty.³

¹ Lefebvre, *Documents relatifs à l'histoire des subsistances dans le district de Bergues*, I, 358-59, 389-90.

² Caron, *Recueil*, pp. 71, 86-89; Aulard, *Recueil des actes du comité de salut public*, IX, 690-93.

³ Caron, *Recueil*, pp. 16-20.

As the new food dictators could obtain no complete and reliable information upon the quantities of grain and flour held in the different departments, it was impossible for them to organize requisitions and avoid acts of oppression or conflicts of authority. The district boards through which requisitions were usually sent to the communes were frequently confronted by orders to furnish a particular army with thousands of bushels and at the same time by requests, perhaps orders, from a neighboring departmental board, backed by the Commission of Subsistence, for similar amounts for some large city which was on the verge of famine. Occasionally in sheer despair the district magistrates appealed for protection to the local deputy to the Convention.¹

The enforcement of the rule that the communes must furnish the markets to which they were tributary before 1789 caused enormous trouble and expense. The story of a single case is typical. Before every market day the district magistrates of Chaumont were obliged to send to the communes a statement of the number of bushels they were expected to bring. Often not a sixth of the amount required was at hand on market day. On one occasion in the spring of 1794 a small commune was ordered to furnish a neighboring commune three hundred bushels. It refused and soldiers were sent. The villagers rang the tocsin, and forty or fifty women surrounded the carters who were to transport the grain, crying that no one should take it away except at the peril of his life. The district board sent more troops, who arrested twelve women and one man and carried them off to prison. Several weeks later these unfortunate rioters were acquitted by the courts.² In the district of Bergues in the Nord only three or four communes out of forty-one would conform to the demands made upon them. The district magistrate summoned the mayors to appear, and ordered them imprisoned unless they signed a promise to send in the grain within ten days. In the same district a more ingenious scheme was tried in the fall of 1794. The farmer who was most backward was arrested, replaced at home by a prisoner of war,

¹ J. Adher, *Le comité des subsistances de Toulouse*, p. 58; Charles Lorain, *Les subsistances en céréales dans le district de Chaumont*, I, 668-69; "Rapports de Grivel et de Siret," *Bulletin de Commission*, etc. (1907) (cited hereafter as *Grivel et Siret*), p. 126.

² Lorain, I, 530, and *passim*.

fed and paid at his expense, and employed by the commune in threshing grain.¹

In order to increase the amount of flour the Convention in November, 1793, forbade the millers to extract more than 15 per cent of bran. The same law ordered the bakers to make but one kind of bread.² In many places the bread, like the army bread, was composed of a mixture of wheat, rye, and barley. In the poor districts of the South millet and maize were used.³ Sooner or later it became necessary to restrict the consumption of the individual and to ration the community. Until this was done in Paris crowds besieged the bakeries. Late in November the municipal council decided to issue bread cards. The plan was that each individual or head of a family should make a declaration of the amount of bread required. He was then to receive a card good for one month, containing coupons for each day. When he procured his daily allowance, he was to hand in the coupon, which the bakers should return to the central market, in order that their use of the flour given them might be checked up. As soon as this system was introduced the disturbances at the bakeries ceased, at least for some weeks.⁴

In Toulouse the authorities had to go still farther. They frankly abandoned the pretense of having grain and flour sold at the market, and placed the stocks which were commandeered in public storehouses. Those who did their baking at home obtained supplies there. As the food committee distrusted the bakers, they built a communal bakery large enough to make bread for thirty thousand citizens. The distribution was made through subdivisions of the city containing equal numbers of people. No one had a right to present himself unless he was provided with a bread card. The committee reported that the system worked well all through the winter and spring of 1794. Rationing by families was not without its grim humors, for one town complained that the families were not accustomed to announce any deaths to the food committee, but uniformly applied for the same amount of bread.⁵

¹ Lefebvre, I, 479-80, 534-36, 548.

² Caron, *Recueil*, p. 77.

³ Adher, pp. 104-7.

⁴ *Moniteur*, XVIII, 293.

⁵ Adher, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-84.

Toward the spring of 1794 the supplies of grain in many parts of the country became so small that no more than a pound a day could be given out, and this only to laborers. Other persons had to content themselves with three-fourths of a pound. In the neighborhood of Toulouse the inhabitants were limited to half a pound, and most of this millet or maize. A ration of that size was altogether too small in view of the fact that it was practically impossible to obtain meat, butter, eggs, oil, and other articles of food commonly regarded as necessary.

The plan for the enforcement of a maximum price for grain, upon which the cost of bread depended, was closely associated with the more general scheme of price-fixing, which covered other articles of food as well as the common necessities of life. The law of September 29 named forty articles, or classes of articles, as of primary necessity, and provided that the price until September 1, 1794, should be one-third higher than the local price of 1790.¹ From the rule about rates were excepted charcoal, pit-coal, firewood, tobacco, salt, and soap, in the case of which the prices were specified or a different rate provided. The list of necessities was by no means complete, for it did not mention milk, crude sugar, fish, or fowl. Nothing was said about a difference between a wholesale and a retail price, and no provision was made for the cost of transportation. If it should be urged that the price of 1790 included transportation expenses, this would ignore the fact that such costs had increased even faster than ordinary prices. The roads and canals had fallen into neglect. Horses and wagons by the thousand had been seized for army use. The coasting trade had become precarious owing to the activities of the British fleet. The chief objection to the plan was probably its refusal to look the facts in the face and allow for a greater addition to the rates of 1790. Meat, for example, was three times as dear, and the same was true of all the finer cloths.²

The law was not passed without protest. One deputy explained that it meant ruin to both manufacturer and merchant. Any

¹ Duvergier, VI, 193-95.

² *Opinion de L. Lecointre sur le maximum à établir pour les denrées et marchandises de première nécessité, 26 Septembre, 1793.*

man who had on hand stock worth one hundred thousand livres would see its value reduced by the new rates to thirty-three thousand. How was he to pay his bills and go on with his business? Another deputy¹ pointed out the failure to distinguish between places of manufacture and places of consumption, or to take account of the vast increase in the cost of carriage. But the committee in charge of the measure refused to descend into this labyrinth of costs of production, transportation, and distribution; it insisted upon the simple scheme of a flat rate of addition everywhere. The law did not even state that the goods should be of the first quality, although a provision of this kind was in the original project. It thus left a good-sized loophole of escape for dealers. The original project also contained a provision that in the case of imported articles, such as copper, soda, and the oils that enter into the composition of soap, some allowance should be made for the purchase price and the rate of foreign exchange. But the advocates of simplification expunged these provisions.

The duty of ascertaining the prices of 1790 and of making the legal addition was imposed upon the district magistrates, and they were given a week to complete their work. Even if these men, many of them unaccustomed to affairs of trade, were able to do the work upon such short notice, the result would be as many rates for goods as there were districts in France, that is to say, about six hundred. With the recent memory of what the departmental boards had done in applying a similar plan to the price of grain the prospect was delays, arbitrary action, and pursuit of local interests.

If prices were to be reduced to a lower level and kept there for a year, wages also must be put under control, or production could not go on. The tenderness of the Convention for the *sans-culottes*, a sympathy quickened by politics, led the majority to provide that wages should be one-half higher than in 1790, instead of one-third. The attempt to control wages was, however, made uncertain because the task of fixing the rates was intrusted to town and village councils, which were likely to be more under the influence of

¹ The first was Lecointre and the second Lozeau. Lozeau's speech is in *Arch. parl.*, LXXV, 189-90.

employees than of employers. Moreover, no time was named within which the new rates must be promulgated. In one respect the plan of compulsory effort was applied to workmen as well as to producers. Both could be punished if, when required by the magistrates, they should refuse to carry on their usual tasks. Shutdowns and strikes were not to be tolerated.

The plan differed in another way from the law upon grain; there was no provision for commandeering goods. Notwithstanding their experience with the first maximum for grain, the deputies assumed that the merchants would go on buying and selling at a loss. Few seemed to realize that the production of goods was harder to control than the production of food. The farmer's crops are an affair of the season. One day and one month is not like another. If he stops work, it may mean that he cannot begin again for a year, and that he will starve. Seedtime and harvest have something inexorable about them, and so he plants, hoping that by harvest time his tormentors may have been thrust down into the lowest political oblivion, and that he may sell or eat as he chooses. It is different with the manufacturer or the merchant. He can stop today, and begin next week, if the politicians relent or circumstances change. Winter and summer are alike to him. If his profits disappear, he must stop; he will starve if he does not, while the farmer would starve if he did.

The leaders of the Convention either learned the lessons of experience quickly or never believed in the plan of September 29. Barère, speaking for the Committee of Public Safety on November 2, explained that the local boards could not be trusted to do their work thoroughly and fairly, and that prices should be made by a central authority. He said that the bill was fundamentally wrong in ignoring the stages of production and distribution from the time the raw material was in the hands of the manufacturer until the finished goods were piled on the shelves of the retail merchant. The law, he added, favored the manufacturer or the wholesaler, who could put the maximum price on his goods, and well-nigh ruined the retailer, who was condemned to certain loss. For the first time in many months a responsible leader talked about the legitimate gains of industry, and asserted that the merchant,

at least the retail trader, was a useful member of society. In a later speech Barère branded the law of September 29 as a "snare laid for the Convention by the enemies of the Republic." He intimated that intriguers had seduced the people, exciting them against the merchants, while at the same time arousing the greed of the merchants for higher profits. His opposition to the law was patent, however inaccurate his diagnosis of its origin. Saint-Just also had criticized it because its principal effect had been to double the value of the money in the pockets of the rich.¹

The committee plan, which the Convention accepted at once, called for the prices of 1790 at the point of production—in other words, the manufacturer's price. To this should be added not merely one-third, but also an allowance for transportation, together with profits of 5 per cent for the wholesaler and 10 per cent for the retailer. The plan further provided an indemnity for the retail merchant who could show that the effect of the September law had been to reduce his capital below ten thousand livres. No sympathy was wasted on merchants or manufacturers who had gone out of business. They were to be put on the list of suspects.²

It was an arduous task to collect the price of each distinctive brand of every article included among the necessities of life. The framers of the law had no conception of the time the preliminary inquiry would take, for in intrusting the work to the new Commission of Supplies the Convention voted that it should be carried into effect immediately, and that the commission should report within a month how it was working in different sections of the republic. This was on November 2. By dint of the most assiduous efforts the commission was able to complete the schedules of prices at the point of production by February 22.³ In their printed form these schedules fill 1,278 pages. They had then to be sent to each district, where the legal allowances were added,

¹ For speech of Barère see *Moniteur*, XVIII, 320 f. For Saint-Just's speech, *Arch. parl.*, LXXVII, 313-17. Barère's later speech was made on the 3 Ventôse. *Moniteur*, XIX, 526-28, 533 f.

² Duvergier, VII, 80-81.

³ M. Biollay says that the work was done more efficiently than the capacity of the agents gave reason to expect. Barère in his speech on the 3 Ventôse spoke of the value of the work.

and the schedules printed anew for the use of merchants and citizens. In many cases the local printers did not have type enough to push forward the work rapidly, and the last of the schedules could not be put in force everywhere before August, 1794. By this time the Reign of Terror was over and the scheme of force was on the defensive.¹

According to the new plan the Commission of Supplies could commandeer whatever was necessary to furnish the army and navy and to keep the markets of the interior stocked. The principle stated by Barère declared that the republic was temporary proprietor of everything which commerce, industry, and agriculture could produce or import. The question was whether the government was able to act on such a principle without falling into all kinds of petty oppression, lacking as it did an organized body of administrators, trained to habits of exactitude and guided by traditions of fidelity. In the fall of 1793 governmental agents were chosen and dismissed with bewildering rapidity. Many were

¹ The work of the Commission de Recherche et de Publication des Documents relatifs à la vie économique de la Révolution has not as yet resulted in the publication of collections of documents upon the *Maximum Général*. In 1913 M. Pierre Caron was authorized to prepare a manual for the guidance of the scholars who were to edit the volumes of documents in this series. His manual was to include, as in the case of his *Commerce des céréales*, the important laws, regulations, and administrative circulars bearing on this subject. The accomplishment of this task has been delayed by the war. Meanwhile, we have many published documents useful in studying the subject. In the series on Les Subsistances, to which the volumes of Mm. Lefebvre, Lorain, and Adher belong, there are scattered references to the subject. There are others in the following collections of documents: F. Mourlot, *Recueil des documents d'ordre économique dans les registres de délibérations des municipalités du district d'Alençon* (Orne), 3 vols.; the Grivel et Siret reports already referred to; Caron's *Paris pendant la Terreur*, 2 vols.; *Archives municipales de Bordeaux, inventaire sommaire*, II. Interesting descriptions of conditions in Paris are found in Mercier's *Nouveau Paris*, chap. 90. C. A. Dauban's two books (*La Démagogie en 1793 à Paris* and *Paris en 1794 et en 1795*) contain many documents on the subject. G. Lefebvre in the *Bulletin* of the Commission (1913) has described the operation of the *Maximum Général* in the District of Bergues. He has also referred to this subject in an article on La Société populaire de Bourbourg (*Revue du Nord*, IV, 273-323). Information will be found in the histories of localities, for example M. Babeau's *Histoire de Troyes pendant la Révolution*, II, chap. 26. Reference should also be made to M. Biollay's valuable *Les Prix en 1790*, which is based on a study of the documents in the papers of the Commission of Supplies. An original copy of the *Tableau de Maximum Général*, in two volumes, issued by this commission in 1794, is included in the Ford Collection of the New York Public Library.

miserable henchmen of the dominant Jacobin party, ignorant and brutal, fond of playing the petty tyrant, in poor imitation of their masters, who practiced the art in the grand style at Paris. The acts of such men discredited the efforts of thousands of others who labored with self-sacrificing zeal for the welfare of the country. Some agents would enter a town, commandeer all the merchandise, and hurry off without selecting what was necessary for the government. In December, 1794, a committee of the Convention found that merchandise requisitioned a year before had not been taken away. Stories were told of agents entering a village, seizing two or three hundred pigs, choosing forty, and leaving the rest for future requisition. The farmers, discouraged, neglected the poor animals and they perished. In several districts the farmers had killed their fowls half-grown in fear of seizures. The manner in which horses and mules were commandeered for transport use was often worse than the methods of the detested "Royal Corvée." Little regard was paid to whether the farmers were planting or reaping; the animals were overloaded, underfed, and knocked in the head if they collapsed, or were sent back hopelessly broken. If the agents were corrupt, worse things happened. Merchants were forced to sell at the maximum, and the agents then sold the goods at double or even quadruple the price. If the merchants complained, the agents had friends on the local revolutionary committee or in the popular society who knew how to silence them. To add to the confusion the district and municipal officers, in order to protect their communities against grasping neighbors, put all their food and goods in requisition.¹ They commandeered everything that passed through. For example, a Paris merchant had brandies at Rochefort and La Rochelle, wines, salt, and oil at Nantes, and sugar at Morlaix. He could not bring them to Paris, where they were needed, because the municipalities had put them under requisition.² From such sources came endless conflicts of authority, letter-writing, protests, appeals, and expenses.

¹ *Procès-verbaux des comités d'agriculture*, etc., IV, 612; Dauban, *Paris en 1794 et en 1795*, p. 479; also a petition from a popular society in the Department of L'Herault, *Arch. parl.*, LXXXII, 235-36.

² Grivel et Siret, *Bulletin* (1907), p. 167.

The dishonest trader took advantage of the confusion and sold the government goods far below grade. The cloths were not woven well or properly fulled; they were stretched to meet the required width or length; the fraud was difficult to detect and punish, because everything was heaped together in a public storehouse, uninspected for months.

The first effects of the posting of prices had been a great rush to the shops. Many articles could be had at half or a third of their previous price. It was bargain day in Paris and all over France, a dazzling opportunity to exchange paper for goods, food, clothing, and all the necessities of life. While the law was still new the shopkeepers did not dare to violate it openly. To conceal their goods was to be guilty of hoarding. At Paris they either took their chances with the guillotine or sold out with astounding rapidity. A city councilor complained that within two hours of the promulgation of the prices grocers said they were out of sugar. Many shops closed altogether; others when their shelves were bare did not renew their stock. Some went through the form of bankruptcy to deceive the vigilant eye of local committeemen. At Péronne, writes our English lady, "the shopkeepers secreted as many of their goods as they could; and, when the day arrived, the people laid siege to them in crowds, some buying at the maximum, others less ceremonious, and in a few hours little remained in the shops beyond the fixtures." Everybody could not be watched, and so it was the grocer and the butcher who were forced to conform to the law, while others learned how to violate it with safety. This was especially true after the plan was discredited by the acceptance in the Convention of a scheme of prices fundamentally different. Shopkeepers would begin by saying that they had not the goods; if the individual was safe, the shopkeeper added, doubtless in a low tone, "certain articles may be had, but not *au maximum*."¹

In the smaller communities the enforcement of the law was often only a pretense. The councils, revolutionary committees, and popular societies were filled up with farmers and petty shopkeepers. If the sans-culottes grumbled too much about prices, the

¹ *Moniteur*, XVIII, 121; Lorain, pp. 473-74; *Residence in France*, II, 49 f.

familiar machinery of denunciation could be set in motion. To keep the agents of the higher authorities in good temper, resolutions were adopted from time to time commanding in the severe tones of the current Jacobin vocabulary the strict enforcement of the law and the relentless pursuit of all egoists. In the large towns also the terms of the law were not literally obeyed and high rates were made, either to favor a local product or to attract a supply of a much needed article. Devices of this kind were used after the second maximum was introduced; at least butter in Paris was priced high enough to bring it in from distant markets. By paying more than the usual price when butter was plenty the Parisian was supposed to be guaranteed a supply when it was scarce.¹

It was the honest merchant who became the victim of the law. His less scrupulous compeer refused to succumb. The butcher in weighing meats added more scraps than before, *rejouissances* these were called with delicate irony. The dealers in cooked meats, or *charcutiers*, had been accustomed to sell raw pork, but as soon as it was put on the list of necessities and its price fixed, they cooked it, for cooked meats were not listed. When their customers remonstrated, they replied that they had sold raw pork, although their rules had required them to sell only cooked meats, "but," said they, "such an abuse should not go on in an austere republic."² Other shopkeepers sold second-rate goods at the maximum. Manufacturers made an inferior article and sold it under the same name. A deputy overheard two merchants discussing the matter: "How does the maximum go?" asked one. "Not too badly," was the reply. "But," said the first, "goods are rated." "Very well," was the rejoinder, "the government is actually paying nine livres for stuff which cost only seven livres ten sous before."³ The common people complained that they were buying pear juice for wine, the oil of poppies for olive oil, ashes for pepper, and starch for sugar.

If evidence were needed that all was not right with the scheme of price-control, it could be found in the rapid growth of a contraband trade. The towns, and especially Paris, were infested with

¹ Grivel et Siret, pp. 127-28, 142-43, 214.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 109-204.

³ *Moniteur*, XVIII, 289.

petty traders, who were called *revendeurs* or *marcandiers*, a name which does not seem equivalent to our word huckster, because they did not cry their wares; they were anxious to escape attention. The English lady whom I have quoted several times called them higglers. They were chiefly women, although those who denounced them rarely spoke of them as *revendeuses* and *marcandières*. The *marcandiers* dealt in meat and many of them were butchers' employees who deserted their shops and sold on the corners of the streets or carried it to the doors of apartments. They dealt in meat of poor quality and half-spoiled, and yet charged more than the maximum prices for it. In general the petty traders peddled products which were not bulky, and which could be readily hidden if some revolutionary food committee became overcurious. They went out in the country and bought butter and eggs for their city customers, or if the country people needed sugar, they found a merchant who had a secret supply, bought of him, and carried it to the farmers. Often such products passed through three or four hands before they reached the consumer. This petty trade became almost a mania, for thousands of persons on account of the disorganization of industry could do nothing else. When the town authorities attempted to check its growth the traders openly declared that they would meet force with force. At one time the peasants coming to the Paris markets were plundered on the road by these traders or their friends, in order that the contraband business might have no rivals.¹

The position in which the maximum left the honest merchant or farmer was made worse, if there are degrees in such distress, by the failure to carry out the scheme for a wage scale. Workmen were accused of asking three, four, even ten times their former wages. If their demands were met, they worked two or three days and spent the remainder of the decade in good cheer at the inn.² So many farm laborers had been drawn away by conscription that the rest had the farmers at their mercy. The farmers sometimes paid no attention to the wage scale, if one was adopted, because

¹ *Moniteur*, XIX, 616, 646; Tuetey, *Répertoire*, etc., X, Nos. 1864, 1872; Lefebvre in *Bulletin* (1913), District of Bergues, *passim*.

² Repeatedly in Grivel et Siret.

they preferred to pay high wages rather than lose crops. In June, 1794, the Convention attempted to enforce a uniform policy by passing a stringent decree that wage scales should be promulgated everywhere. Their motive was the new grain already ripening for the reapers. This law applied to the towns as well. Paris did not publish the scale until July 23, and then the action of the council raised a storm. A few days later most of the councilors perished with Robespierre, and the mob jeered at them in the carts of the executioner, crying out, "There goes the dirty maximum."¹

If the maximum laws were meant to save the common people from want and wretchedness, they failed. The scarcity in 1794 was most severe in the supplies of meat, wood, charcoal, pit-coal, and candles. As the days grew shorter in the fall long lines of men and women would stand in front of the shops where candles were sold. Sometimes the women would fight for preference, because if they could not obtain a supply their husbands would be forced to stop work too early. The same reason brought crowds to the quays where wood and coal were sold. The police reported that often a thousand persons waited all night for the gates to open. Fifty or sixty soldiers were required to keep them in line. Workmen or employers who were a little better off than their neighbors hired agents to stand in line for them. It was almost as difficult to obtain a little meat. In March one police observer reported that one hundred and fifty women had crowded up to a butcher's door at four o'clock in the morning. They screamed out that it was better to pay twenty or thirty sous and have what they wanted than to pay fourteen, the maximum price, and get nothing. Mercier in his description of Revolutionary Paris paints a lurid picture of crowds of men and women pushing their way along the narrow aisles of the central market, following with famished eyes some porter bent under a side of beef. To clear the path in front of stalls the gendarmes would ride their horses through the crowd or great porters would use their shoulders in a flying wedge. Women would stand in line for hours shivering with the cold, only to be told when their turn came that nothing was left.

¹ Lorain, 500-501; Commission, *Bulletin* (1907), pp. 331-32.

The picture was surely gloomy, but shall we conclude that the attempt at price-fixing and fair distribution of the necessities of life was an utter failure? There is some truth in the remark, years later, of one of the Jacobin deputies: "Our critics must prove that the maximum has not lessened the wretchedness of the masses, and so stimulated their enthusiasm, before blaming us for establishing it."¹ It did bring relief to the people of the towns during the fall and winter of 1793-94. Without it the prices would have continued to rise rapidly, as they had from January to September. This would have put bread beyond the reach of the poor, unless the municipalities had all imitated Paris, and had fixed a price, indemnifying the bakers. A maximum price, with the right of seizure, saved the municipalities from such a crushing burden, but did it at the expense of the farmer. The effect of the law of September 11, reinforced by that of September 29, is revealed in the rise of the value of the assignat from 23 in July to 40 in January, 1794. The effect was bound to be temporary, because a system of force is ill adapted to the normal activities of mankind. As Roland, the Girondin Minister of the Interior had said, "Once begun, it must be employed continuously, while its use aggravates the need, until soon half the nation must be armed against the other half." The experiment suffered from the fundamental vice that it was contrived in a spirit of hostility to the manufacturer, the merchant, and the farmer. Their co-operation was not asked, not even expected; the watchword was coercion, terror. Even after the spirit changed, a sound organization was lacking. The government had nothing to substitute for the old mechanism of industry and trade except floods of circulars and hordes of agents and place-fillers.

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¹ Levasseur, *Mémoires*, I, 149.